

The Sceptic Michel De Montaigne

Karl-Erik Andersson

Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Email: karl-erik.andersson@med.lu.se

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Abstract

Michel de Montaigne, the originator and unrivaled master of the essay, has many admirers who view him as a skeptic. This article discusses the nature of Montaigne's skepticism, how skepticism is reflected in his life and work, and how this could be reconciled with his religious beliefs. Montaigne had a naturally skeptical mind, but it can hardly be said that he practically lived as a skeptic. However, his constant search for truth, comparing arguments for and against without giving a final judgment, makes him a pragmatic skeptic. He often emphasizes the importance of questioning and objective examination. Seeking the truth, shaking things up, doubting, not holding anything for certain, not guaranteeing anything, and then withholding judgment (judgment suspension) characterize Montaigne's skepticism, which is also marked by humility and self-criticism. Montaigne was a devout Catholic and showed great respect for religion. How this could be combined with accepting skepticism is a matter of speculation. A plausible explanation could be that he believed in religion but simultaneously denied that we can know the "truths" theology tries to convey—faith is independent of reason.

Keywords

Essay, Philosophy, Pyrrhonism, Judgment Suspension, Catholicism, Fideism

1. Introduction

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a prominent figure of French humanism. He was a jurist, author, and, for a period, mayor of Bordeaux. However, Montaigne withdrew early from public life to his library, where he wrote the essays published from 1580-1595 (Montaigne, 2012), that became his life's work. He is regarded as the originator and unrivaled master of the essay. Montaigne has many admirers who view him as a skeptic. One of them is Ralph Waldo Emerson (2016), who, in his essay "Montaigne; or the Skeptic" writes:

I will, under the shield of this prince of egotism, offer, as an apology for electing him as a representative for skepticism, a word or two to explain how my love began and grew for this admirable gossip... Montaigne is the frankest and honest of all writers... Shall we say that Montaigne has spoken wisely, and given the right and permanent expression of the human mind, on the conduct of life?

1.1. Rationale for the Study

Montaigne was a devout Catholic and showed great respect for religion. According to Emerson, Montaigne was a man with a naturally skeptical mind but also a practitioner of practical skepticism. But is this correct? On what grounds did Montaigne base his skepticism? Can his well-documented Catholic faith be reconciled with an acceptance of skepticism? Based on the essays and previous studies, this study aims to discuss these questions:

1.2. Research Questions

- What was the nature of Montaigne's skepticism? How does it manifest in his life and work?
- How did Montaigne combine skepticism and religious faith?

1.3. Previous Research

Overviews of Montaigne's life and work, analyzing his essays from different perspectives, can be found in the various chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne* (Langer, 2005). For this article, I have chosen to base my research on these chapters and on specific texts published by Henrik Lagerlund (2022), William Hamlin (2020), and Anne Hartle (2003, 2013).

1.4. Method

Assessing areas of agreement and disagreement between the different sources used, I have tried to fill some knowledge gaps and synthesize information to answer my research question and to gain a comprehensive understanding and more nuanced picture of the themes I have discussed.

2. Ancient Skepticism

Ancient skepticism (see: *Ancient Skeptics*, 2010; Sjöstedt, 1953) began around 300 BC with the Pyrrhonian and Academic movements, summarized by Sextus Empiricus in the 2nd century AD. Pyrrho of Elis (365-275 BC) is considered the founder of skepticism. According to Diogenes Laertius (2018), who describes Pyrrho and his philosophy through testimonies from his students, Pyrrho did not form a formal school and wrote nothing himself. Pyrrho was an eccentric person who was unaffected by anything—he had to be protected by his surroundings. Diogenes Laertius recounts many anecdotes about this. Pyrrho's student Timon of Phlius is said to have summarized his teachings in three brief questions and answers: "What are things like?—we cannot know; how should we relate to

them?—without opinion; what do we gain by relating properly to them?—peace of mind.” In the introduction to Pyrrhonian Outlines, one of the most important sources of our knowledge of ancient skepticism, Sextus Empiricus writes:

Those who seek something must either find it, be convinced that it cannot be found, or continue searching.

He describes the differences between three kinds of philosophical teachings: the dogmatic, the academic, and the skeptical. The dogmatists claim to have found the solution, the truth—this includes the Aristotelians, Epicureans, and Stoics. The Academics (e.g., Clitomachus and Carneades) claim that the problems are insoluble, while the Skeptics are those who continue searching. The Greek word “skeptikos” means “seeker” or “one who seeks”. Sextus Empiricus emphasizes the seekers’ nature of skeptics and the practice of withholding judgment (“epoché”). His definition of skepticism clarifies this:

Skepticism is an ability to set opposing appearances and thoughts against one another in any way whatsoever, which leads first to suspension of judgment and then to tranquility.

Thus, Pyrrhonists were characterized by a curious search for information, analysis, and comparison, followed by the suspension of judgment. According to Sextus Empiricus, the goal of Pyrrhonian skepticism was to achieve peace of mind, ataraxia. This state is attained through judgment suspension, epoché, a stillness of thought where no reason is seen to prefer one stance over another. Judgment suspension means that a skeptic is expected to live life without convictions. Is it then possible to live without convictions? Sextus perceives this as a skeptic following the laws and customs of the land without judging whether these laws are good or bad, true or false.

3. The Person Michel De Montaigne

Michel Eyquem, Seigneur de Montaigne, was born at Chateau de Montaigne. Montaigne’s father, Pierre Eyquem, was not born a nobleman but received his title after participating in Francis I’s wars in Italy. Montaigne’s mother came from a wealthy Spanish family. The family was well-off, and Montaigne grew up as the eldest of eight surviving siblings. His father had him raised in a simple peasant family to give him early insight into different living conditions. Between the ages of two and six, he had a private tutor who did not speak French, and he could only communicate with him in Latin. Montaigne, therefore, found it easy to read ancient authors in the original language. When he was six years old, he was sent to a boarding school in Bordeaux, and his further education is unclear, but he probably studied law without much success. His father bought him a position at the court in Périgueux, which Montaigne later sold, but he continued as a councilman at the magistrate in Bordeaux until 1570. Montaigne married Françoise de La Chassaigne in 1565, with whom he had six children. Five of the children died in infancy. Montaigne devoted much attention to the education of his only surviving daughter. When his father died in 1568, Montaigne inherited the family estate and

title. In 1571, at the age of 38, Montaigne decided to retire to his estate. To commemorate this event, he had a Latin text painted on the wall of his library:

In the year of our Lord 1571, aged 38, on his birthday, the last of February, Michel de Montaigne retired here, weary of the servitude of the court and public offices but in good health, to rest in the bosom of the learned virgins, where he will spend the little that remains of his life, now more than half over, in peace and freedom from all cares, if only Providence allows him to complete this dwelling, his father's sweet retreat, which he has dedicated to his freedom, his tranquility, and his idleness.

He had already begun his life's work, "Essays", which comprised 107 texts of varying lengths and which he wrote, worked on, and revised between 1570 and 1592. The very name of the work suggests how it should be understood; essay means trial, test, or examination, and the purpose of the trials is to gain knowledge. In 1589, he published the earlier essays slightly revised, as well as several new, significantly longer essays from 1580-1588. During this time, he lived on his estate but also traveled extensively in Europe to seek a cure for his kidney stones; he also served as mayor of Bordeaux for a time.

In his essays, often seeded with a classic Latin quote, he started from his own thoughts. His compositional principle was the flight of thought, and his subject was always himself—a mundane self-consisting equally of body and soul, which also characterizes the subjects of his essays, such as On Anger, On Sorrow, On Idleness, On Cannibals. He was unashamed to candidly discuss his own weaknesses as well as his merits. He had an unending interest in other people and historical figures, whose lives and opinions he liked to compare with his own. Montaigne used his personal experiences extensively in his essays but constantly referred back to ancient thinkers, particularly Plato. In 1588, he came into contact with an admirer, Marie de Gournay, who he eventually considered his foster daughter. She published the definitive text of his Essays in 1595 after his death.

4. Montaigne's Skepticism

Montaigne drew his knowledge of skepticism from texts by Sextus Empiricus (ca. 100-200 AD) "Pyrrhonian Outlines" and Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD) "Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers". Sextus's text had been translated into Latin in 1562 and was available to Montaigne, who was a proficient Latinist. He had also apparently read the critique of Pyrrhonism included in Lucretius's "On the Nature of Things" (*De rerum Natura*). But Montaigne was also familiar with the skepticism taught by Plato's Academy (Clitomachus and Carneades). Although Montaigne did not appreciate Cicero, he was well acquainted with his works and views on skepticism. He was also aware of the contemporary discussion about skepticism.

At his father's urging, Montaigne had translated and published a translation of the natural theologian and theology professor Raymond Sebond's "Natural Theology" in 1569. When the church questioned Sebond's conclusions, Montaigne

wrote, at the behest of Marguerite de Valois of Navarre, one of his most famous essays, “Defense of Raymond Sebond”. In this essay, he describes his view of ancient skepticism. However, most of the essay deals with the claim that we cannot know. Montaigne believed that the senses are unreliable and, therefore, the information they provide is untrustworthy. What can we really know about the nature of the world (Que sais-je?—what do I really know?)? Montaigne presents Pyrrhonism, in the spirit of Sextus Empiricus, as a position between the dogmatists (Stoics, Epicureans) who believed they had found the truth and the Academics who thought the problem was insoluble. He also emphasizes, like Sextus, that Pyrrhonists are seekers of truth:

The task of the Pyrrhonists is therefore to shake things up, doubt, and investigate, not hold anything for certain, not guarantee anything. Of the soul's three functions—the imaginative, the questing, and the approving, they approve the first two, and suspend the third, leaving it uncertain, without the slightest inclination or approval towards either side.

Montaigne shared the Pyrrhonists' view of wisdom—wisdom is to reserve judgment (judgment suspension). This attitude—to register everything without expressing approval or disapproval, leads the Pyrrhonist to ataraxia. Montaigne's image of the Pyrrhonists as “mild-mannered debaters who examine and doubt and try to find out if the positions scrutinized withstand their method” is very positive. He writes:

Typical expressions for them are “I affirm nothing”, “it is neither this nor that”, “nor either more than the other”, “I understand nothing”, “the appearance is equal in all respects”, “it is equally valid to speak for or against”, “nothing seems true which cannot also seem false”. Their sacred word is epecho, that is “I hold back”, “I do not move”.

But he is not only positive but also critical of the attitude that we should live according to things as they appear. Since things appear differently in different situations, this attitude is not suitable as a guide for action. Additionally, the Pyrrhonists cannot live their skepticism because life involves making judgments and committing actions that require consent. He sometimes also questions Sextus Empiricus's view that a skeptic should follow the laws and customs of the country he lives in without judging whether these laws are good or bad, true or false.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Montaigne's Life Skepticism

One might ask how Montaigne's skepticism is expressed in his life. Was his withdrawal from the world an attempt to realize the Pyrrhonian goal of achieving peace of mind? Did he intend to withdraw and let his soul be idle, stop, and rest in itself to achieve tranquility and clarity? He describes what happened in the chapter “On Idleness”:

A soul without a fixed goal goes astray, for being everywhere is being nowhere... But I find that idleness gives rise to restlessly changing thoughts and that

it makes the soul behave like a runaway horse.

To quietly contemplate the “follies and oddities” that idleness’s thought flows created, he began to record them (to later use them in his writing). Montaigne led a very active life even after his years at court and did not live as a hermit. So, he never became a practicing skeptic. He eventually realized that writing involved a division into an observing self and an observed self. His view of skepticism may have influenced his own writing:

I can understand why the Pyrrhonian philosophers cannot express their general view with any mode of speech: they would need a new language. Ours consists entirely of affirmative propositions, which they entirely reject—so much so that they say, “I doubt”, and immediately people attack them to make them admit that they at least know that they doubt. Thus, they have been forced to resort to the following analogy with medicine, without which their disposition would be inexplicable. When they say, “I do not know” or “I doubt”, they say that this proposition drives itself out along with the rest, just as rhubarb drives out the bad humors and at the same time expels itself. This mindset is best captured in the question form, “What do I know?” a motto which I have had inscribed along with the image of a scale.

Montaigne began to analyze himself, searching for his own authenticity. He was influenced by Heraclitus and had a strong sense of the self’s mutability. But his search did not lead to judgment suspension and inactivity. His skepticism is pragmatic—he often followed Sextus Empiricus’s advice that it is wisest to follow the customs where he was. Montaigne’s skepticism is characterized by humility and self-criticism, and he emphasizes the importance of questioning and objective examination. In “On Cannibals”, Montaigne highlights the positive aspects of the cannibals’ simple way of life. They go to war (besides for defense) only due to the men’s desire to show their courage, not like us under the pretext of piety and religion. He emphasizes that cannibalism, which we consider gruesome and barbaric, is a ritual act—captured prisoners are treated with respect before they are killed and eaten. In contrast, he highlights the barbarity in our behavior of “eating” a person while they are still alive, torturing, tearing apart, burning alive, and desecrating people—not only enemies but also neighbors and citizens for not having the right faith. Montaigne’s text reflects his influence from Pyrrhonism: analysis, comparison, but no condemnations—judgment suspension! No one can possess the absolute truth—you have only a limited perspective. All values of what is good and evil, right or wrong, must be set in their cultural and historical context—look at yourself before judging others!

Montaigne had only one surviving daughter and paid much attention to her upbringing. In his essays, he also expressed great interest in child-rearing, such as in “On the Affection of Fathers for Their Children” and “On the Education of Children”, where his skeptical attitude shines through:

The teacher must make the student sift everything and never store anything in his head just because it has authority and deserves trust. Aristotle’s principles

should not be his guide, nor should those of the Stoics or Epicureans. The student should be presented with these different views, then let him choose if he can, otherwise, let him remain doubtful.

Doubt and investigate, not hold anything for certain, not guarantee anything, compare and possibly come to judgment suspension—the hallmarks of Pyrrhonism should also permeate children’s upbringing.

Judgment is central to the skeptic’s testing activity, and personal judgment is an indispensable resource for an independent person. In “On Democritus and Heraclitus,” Montaigne describes how he proceeds:

Judgment is an instrument for all subjects, it can be applied everywhere. In the trials of it that I perform here, I therefore use all opportunities. If it concerns a subject that I do not understand at all, I test the judgment precisely on that: I gauge the ford from a distance, and if I then find it too deep for my length, I stay on the shore. The realization that I cannot cross is also a result of the judgment’s activity, yes, one of the things it is most proud of. Sometimes I let the judgment loose on an empty and worthless subject and try to see if it can give it any substance, support it and back it up, sometimes I let it loose on an elevated and chewed-over subject where it cannot make any own discoveries because the path is so trodden that it can only follow in others’ tracks. There, it is the judgment’s role to select the path it thinks is the best.

Montaigne tested his own experiences and tried his judgment by working with many subjects and by testing his own findings and experiences against those of others.

5.2. Montaigne and Religion

Montaigne was a good Catholic, and during a trip to Rome, he had an audience with the Pope and kissed his foot. He did not see any conflict between skepticism and religion. Being a skeptic did not have to mean a contradiction—the church often encouraged skeptical criticism to assert the necessity of faith. However, it is remarkable that Montaigne did not apply a skeptical analysis to, for example, biblical stories. The explanation might be the attitude towards the church that he gives in “On Prayers”:

...I present formless and open questions, not to establish the truth but to seek it, and I leave the task of resolving these questions to those whose duty it is to guide not only my actions and writings but also my thoughts. A condemnation will be as welcome and useful as a disapproval, for if there is any statement in this mishmash, due to ignorance or inattention, that contradicts the holy decisions and prescriptions issued by the apostolic Roman Catholic Church, in which I die and am born—then I find all such statements absurd and impious. While I thus always conform to their authoritative censorship, which has all power over me, I lightly tackle all kinds of subjects—as here.

This description can be interpreted as conflicting with his view that personal judgment is an indispensable resource for an independent person.

Many have interpreted Montaigne's Catholicism as a practical stance that could provide social and political stability rather than a religious conviction. He has been regarded as a skeptical fideist, i.e., someone who believes in religion. Still, he simultaneously denies that we can know the "truths" theology tries to convey—faith is independent of reason. However, it does not seem that his views on Pyrrhonism would be incompatible with his Christian faith:

No system devised by man is more probable and useful than Pyrrhonism. It shows man naked and empty, realizing his innate weakness and therefore ready to receive some external force from above; deprived of human knowledge and therefore more fit to harbor the divine knowledge within him; annihilating his judgment to make more room for faith; not unbelieving, not affirming any doctrine that violates ordinary laws and customs, humble, obedient, teachable, and diligent, a sworn enemy of heresy and consequently distancing itself from empty and impious intentions introduced by false schools. She is a blank slate, ready to receive the signs that it pleases God to engrave. The more we surrender to God, entrust ourselves to him, and give up ourselves, the better for us.

6. Summary and Conclusion

Montaigne's skepticism is expressed in his life and his life's work—his essays. It can hardly be said that he lived as a Pyrrhonian skeptic, as depicted by Diogenes Laertius. Still, his constant search for truth, comparing arguments for and against without giving a final judgment, makes him a pragmatic skeptic. He often emphasizes the importance of questioning and objective examination. Seeking the truth, shaking things up, doubting, not holding anything for certain, not guaranteeing anything, and then withholding judgment (judgment suspension) characterize Montaigne's skepticism, which is also marked by humility and self-criticism. Even though Montaigne sometimes questions Sextus Empiricus's view that a skeptic should follow the laws and customs of the country he lives in without judging whether these laws are good or bad, true or false, this was something he did in reality.

Being a skeptic does not have to mean a contradiction to being a good (Catholic) Christian—the church often encouraged skeptical criticism to assert the necessity of faith. Respect for religion is found in many of Montaigne's essays, but there is no skeptical analysis applied to, for example, biblical stories. It is hard to imagine that Montaigne avoided this to avoid offending the church. A more plausible explanation could be that he believed in religion but simultaneously denied that we can know the "truths" theology tries to convey—faith is independent of reason—a fideistic compromise worthy of the skeptic Montaigne.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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